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THE PRODIGAL SON:

FOUR DISCOURSES

BY THE
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To
The Congregation
Worshipping in Victoria Chapel, Clifton,
These Discourses
are affectionately inscribed.

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PREFACE.

THE following Sermons were preached in the ordinary course of my ministry. They make no claim to originality of treatment, but are the result of an attempt to *realize*, as a life-history, the parable of the Prodigal Son. They appeal not so much to reason as to consciousness; and He who has all the hearts of the human in His keeping, has willed that some of them should be touched by these home-pictures and appeals. Many who have listened to them have requested their publication, and new circumstances have risen up around me which render resistance no longer graceful. Hence, on the eve of departure over "many waters," which will yet fail to sever me from the love of my country and of my friends, I leave this modest memorial, with the blessing of a full heart; and with the prayer that the Divine Spirit, who honoured the preaching of these Sermons, may make the printing of them yet more powerful for good.

W. M. P.

LONDON, *April*, 1868.

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THE PRODIGAL SON.

I.

SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

“And he said, a certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.”—LUKE xv. 11-16.

THERE is something in this inimitable parable which goes straight to every human heart. It is almost impossible to refuse an entrance to it; it storms the strongest fortress of the soul. By its appeal to that latent sensibility to impression—that dormant or sepulchred humanness which underlies, in every man, his surface of passion or pride—it makes its way to the sympathy of the rudest, and surprises the most callous into an emotion which finds its best relief

in tears. The child loves to hear its simple and affecting story ; and many a criminal, whom crime has done its worst to harden, has been subdued by some stray hearing of its experience—it seemed so like his own. The occasion of its utterance was partly in vindication of a character, and partly in enforcement of a principle. When the Saviour entered upon His public ministry, “the common people heard Him gladly,” and His tones of tenderness had a charm for the most detested and depraved. “Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him.” But this fact, which one would have thought would at once have commended His teaching, was tortured into an accusation against Him by the malignity of the Pharisee-mind. From the beginning the Scribes and Pharisees had honoured Him with their hatred, had plotted to ensnare Him into the utterance of sedition or of blasphemy, and had watched eagerly for His fall. All their prejudices were shocked beyond forgiveness, both by the circumstances of His advent, and by the whole tenor of His life. They looked for a King who should sway a visible sceptre, and dwell in a royal palace, or for a Teacher who should pay his court to the doctors of the law, and, having won over the highest minds, who should select from among them those who should be authorised to dispense his truth ; or, if not these, for a Prophet who should be recluse and uncourtly,

and who, awful in sanctities which the city would pollute, could therefore abide only in the wilderness. This was their ideal of the long-promised Messiah; and when Jesus came—not a monarch, but a Nazarene—not a recluse, but a “friend of publicans and sinners”—not the retailer of esoteric doctrine to the privileged few, but the great preacher upon whose lips hung the multitude with amazement and delight, their prejudice deepened into an implacable hostility, which pursued its victim to the death. It is difficult to conceive of a course more calculated to provoke them than that which the Saviour consistently pursued. They looked down upon the masses of the people with a contempt which they cared not to conceal. “This people which knoweth not the law are cursed;” and if there was one class which was held in greater abhorrence than another, it was the class which gathered the taxes of a hated foreign power, and, dressed in a little brief authority, made their office doubly odious by rapacity and extortion. And yet, passing by the anointed priest, the venerable elder, the astute scribe—not to mention themselves, the reputable and ascetic Pharisees—these were the very classes to whom the new Teacher addressed Himself, and in whose companionship He was wont to mingle. Enmity could hardly fail to seize upon so fair an occasion, and she improved it to the uttermost. “Surely,” she would say, in her envenomed

addresses and conversations—"surely you will no more listen to ravings like these! The man has no character; he speaks blasphemy—does His works of healing on the Sabbath—does not fast—drags out a mendicant existence—eats with unwashed hands—consorts with the vilest, doubtless from congeniality of feeling—'receives sinners and eats with them.'" Now it is partly to vindicate Himself against this accusation that the Saviour unfolds to them His principle of action, and appeals to the home-experience of them all whether that principle was not one of the commonest of life. The principle is this, that the mind uniformly goes out in deepest interest, among all the objects of attachment, after that one which is in peril. The three parables illustrate it well. You do not wonder that the woman should be listless about the nine pieces of silver, safe in the desk or in the drawer, but that she should be active and interested about the one piece which she had lost. You feel at once that it is nature for the shepherd to leave the ninety and nine folded, though it were in the wilderness, and seek in pit and glen for the one ~~chapless~~ ^{sheepless} which had wandered astray. And when the illustration is carried higher, and the thing in peril is not a coin, nor a sheep, but a child, you feel, in your heart of hearts—and it is commended to you by your own experience—by the clinging tenderness with which you yearned over the dying babe, by the wake-

ful anxiety with which you tremble for the absent son—that the child that had been alienated, and around whose history had darkened clouds of shame and sin, would on his return wake the highest raptures of deliverance, and be greeted with the heartiest welcome of the father's soul. It is impossible to compress all the lessons of this interesting parable into one discourse. The very riches of the subject have indeed hitherto deterred our approach to it ; but now that, in Divine help, we are venturing among its hidden treasures, we will confine ourselves at first to a brief meditation upon

I. *The prodigal's sin*, and

II. *Its consequences*,

Leaving his change of mind, the bliss of his recovery, and the rather interesting problem of the conduct of the elder son, to furnish us with profit on some future occasion.

And first, as to the prodigal's sin. It has struck me that some amongst you may be congratulating yourselves in secret that here at least you are safe from denunciation and alarm, because the delineation must be of uncommon sin, and of a broad and strongly-marked type of depravity, from whose brand you feel yourselves free. Nay, it is rather one of the most ordinary phases of impiety. I could select thousands upon thousands in this great city who answer in every particular to the graphic description of the text. Do

you see that young man, of high spirits and assured mien—full of generous impulses, carried away by a thoughtless enthusiasm—for whom almost everybody has a good word, about whom there can be many tales told of his quick and graceful courtesy, and of the money that he has squandered in gifts of romantic generosity—a little gay, to be sure, men say, but he's so good-hearted: he is no man's enemy but his own. He would not hurt a worm. He will be sure to see his folly, and it will be all right with him by and by. Ah! THAT is he—the very embodiment of the younger son before us. There is nothing in the narrative which would lead us to suppose that he was disfigured by malevolence or by cruelty. He is not accused of betrayal of human trust, nor of outrage upon human charities. He is very far removed from the sordid and the dastardly. He is simply, like thousands now, a careless, light-hearted child of the world, eager for present enjoyment, and, in the twining of his affections round some realised good, forgetful of the great future for which he ought to live. There is nothing, therefore, in the case before us that can justify your inattention, or that can encourage you to hope that you will escape from the pressure of the truth; and in the anatomy of the prodigal's transgression you will find the scalpel at work upon yourselves.

He sinned, 1, *Because of the alienation of his affection.*

There was the root of his rebellion. He had forgotten the obligations of his position, and the kind outflowings of that generous heart which, for his indulgence, had spared neither effort nor sacrifice. His heart had wandered from its early tenderness, and had become warped, by yielding to a sinful lust of freedom, from its filial love. From this alienated heart, in natural sequence, flowed his after disobedience and sin. And it is to the heart that we must look, brethren, to discover the secret of our own rebellion. We are conscious, each one of us, if we will calmly consider the matter, that our affections are naturally estranged from God. It has been well observed, that there is in the observation both philosophic and religious truth, that there is both an attractive and a repelling principle in human nature towards God. There are instincts in the soul which rise up responsive when we are told that there is a God, and which prompt us to seek for succour or to render homage. There are times in every man's life when he is irresistibly drawn out after God in sentimental or imploring adoration. Whenever emotions are aroused, whether they be of gratitude or of terror, the mind tramples in a moment upon its loudly-vaunted atheisms. When we thrill delightedly at some inspiring tidings, or before some superb scene of travel—when we are rescued from some terrible peril, or give the heart-grasp to some loved one just spared to us

from the gates of the grave ; or when, on the other hand, we are remorseful for some recent sin, in some awakening hour of conscience, beneath some great agony of spirit, when our burdened hearts can find no outlet but in prayer—when we bend over the fastly-waning life which we would give a world to reanimate, or when ourselves are racked in some struggle of mortal pain ;—these are the seasons when we betake ourselves to the thought of the Divine, and call upon the God whom we have been taught to worship, to inspire our faith, or to remove our fear. But even in these moments, when we are attracted towards God, we are conscious of an influence that repels. We are drawn back, as it were, by the power of some invisible hand. In prosperity we are prone, the while we revel in the gift, to be forgetful of the Giver : our hearts become at ease in their possessions, and are inflated with pride. In adversity we either turn our own trouble inwards, and brood about it till it maddens us, or try to lose it amid the whirl of the world's excitements, or drown it in the cup of the drunkard ; and some, infatuated, seek to end the sting of the sorrow by the steel of the suicide. In our consciousness of sin, we either try to banish it from our thoughts entirely, or to believe that the chances of future time will favour us, or to pacify our consciences by a round of external observances ; or, in our own strength, to wrestle proudly with our corruptions, that

we may overcome them. In all these conditions, "God is not in all our thoughts," and we avail ourselves of any resource or expedient rather than seek rest and healing in Him. Our hearts are alienated, there is no outgoing of affection towards the Creator within us. We coldly admit His existence, and that is all ; and when we think of Him it is either with supreme indifference or with abject terror. Brethren, I do charge home upon you this rebellion of the heart to-day, as the fruitful source of your every overt act of treason. Pressing through all the developments of external character, and all the secrecies of conflicting motive, I seize hold of your innermost heart, and I say, Here is the traitor. This heart has thrown off its allegiance, and leagued itself with rebels. This *heart* "is not right in the sight of God." With the heart thus alienated, you can the more readily explain the prodigal's *impatience of restraint*, hankering after present license of enjoyment, and departure from the house of his father. All these followed as the natural consequences of estranged affection. A yoke that is *felt* must always be galling ; an enforced servitude stirs up within the man all latent feelings of rebellion. Hence, when the principle of filial love was gone, the restraint of the home became irksome, the desire for independence grew into a passion, and then followed the project of the journey into a far country, and of the uncontrolled rioting in the

portion of goods. And the like sad absence of reverent love to God has produced in all sinners the like impatience of His laws, and the like wanderings of heart and life. Feelings are the germs of actions ; and it is impossible for an affection to be cherished without an intensification of its energy which will give colour and direction to every activity of the man. We cannot take fire into our bosom, and then escape the penalty of the burning. We cannot without hazard play with the fang of the asp ; nor, until the millennium shall arrive, may the child put his hand upon the cockatrice's den. You cannot look into yourselves, and study carefully your own spiritual state, without confession of your own guilt in this matter. You were indifferent or hostile to God's government. The very conscience which reminded you of His claims, obscured His loving-kindness from you, and urged you to hide from His displeasure. Then you fretted against His laws, and felt them an exacting tyranny rather than an honourable service. Then you were consumed with an avarice for present enjoyment ; and, with a churl's selfishness, you took the bounty from the Father at the time when you were panting to rebel against His authority, and into a far country—the farther the better for your purpose, because the more seemingly beyond control—you took your departure from the ancestral home. And with occasional variations, now of more notorious, now

of more deceitful impiety, this is the biography of you all. It is no strange tale of unexampled ill. It is no foreign history of evil, so atrocious and so alien that you shudder as at the news of a distant massacre, and thank God that you are not as other men. *You* are the ingrates who have abused the Father's kindness; *you* the spendthrifts who have run to this excess of riot; *you* the prodigals who are thus exiled from the Father's heart and home. Brethren, take the humbling truth; and deem me not your enemy for telling it. It is no joy to me thus to dwell upon the prostration of the nature which I share. There is a natural pride within me, which would make me delight to vaunt with the loudest the dignity of human nature, if I dare. But it were folly to cicatrize a wound while the mischief festers in the flesh, or to hide a peril lest a shock should be given to the nervous system of the man in danger; and I but prove the sincerity of my good wishes for your welfare when I follow you into the land of your wandering, and warn you to repent and to return.

It is with like purpose that I now proceed to dwell upon the results or consequences of your sin. The text intimates that there was a season of revelry, during which no outward calamities overtook the prodigal; when he revelled in his delirium of pleasure, and in his dream of freedom; when passion drowned thought, and silenced conscience, and ban-

ished fear ; and when, with ample means and boisterous associates, he "withheld not his heart from any joy." It were to defeat our own purpose to affirm that there are no pleasures in sin. The world would never continue in its ways if it reaped no gratification. There is, doubtless, something congenial to the wayward heart in the objects of its fond pursuit, and there is often thrown a blinding charm about the man, beneath whose spell unholy he fancies every Hecate a Ganymede, and dallies with deformity which he mistakes for beauty ; but our point is this, that in every course of transgression, in every departure of the human spirit from God, there is debasement in the process, and there is ruin in the inevitable end. I think this statement is borne out by the passage on whose truth we are now dilating. There are several ideas suggested by it, which present a fearful picture of the disastrous consequences of sin. There is, for example, what has been well expressed by the word *homelessness*.* He was in a far country : there was the absence, even in his wildest revelry, of domestic joys, and orderly comforts, and all those nameless endearments which realise to a man the feeling of home. There are nations to which this idea of homelessness brings no sense of loss. You might talk vainly about home amid the bleak, gay, outside life of Paris. They have not the

* Robertson.

word in their language—they have not the thing in their hearts ; but to you who know what it is—to whom such words as hearths'one, and roof-tree, and ingle-nook, and fireside, and fatherland, are symbols of blessed meaning, words less sacred only than those which speak of heaven and God—to you there will be a cold shadow, a sense of uttermost and extremest desolation, when you think of homelessness, which can hardly be put into language. Sad are the visions which the thought calls up before you. You seem to see the wreck of some fair human thing who has lost the jewel of her womanhood, whom wolfish lust has cast upon society, and who lives to waylay society in furtherance of her terrible revenge. You see her—eyes sunken and cheeks hectic with intemperance—flitting along under the beetling eaves, gliding alternate from the dazzling dram-shop to the dark arches of congenial obscurity ; or perhaps you follow her fugitive steps, stealthy as a guilty thing's—as she speeds

“Where the lamps quiver
So far in the river,
With many a light,
From garret to basement,
From window and casement,
And stands with amazement,
Houseless by night.”

Oh, is it not a case for heart-break? especially when you

think that this lost one once wore the comely snood of maidenhood, and carolled free and happy as the bird beneath the dear recompense of a mother's smile. But what is every sinner, what are you, if you are at this moment alien from Christ, but homeless in the world? When the storm comes, whither can you flee for shelter? Beneath the world's cold arches? You may drip, and drench, and shiver, but hardly shelter there. In the world's lighted halls of pleasure? Ay, while you have money and means, but when you have spent all they turn you into outer darkness, let the storm howl ever so wildly. Look into the future, *your* future—the future which must come. How dark it is? No prospect! How endless it is! No rest! A homeless spirit! Oh, of all calamities that can afflict me, of all vials of wrath which can be poured out upon my head, surely there can be none of more concentrated and appalling bitterness than this thought of a soul without a home. There is, again, the thought of *waste and degradation*. He “wasted his substance.” “He joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.” How is the fine gold become dim, and the grace of the fashion of it perished! and how close and natural the sequence! First the roystering prodigal, then the spendthrift swineherd; first the real degradation, in the waste of the property and of the time, then the apparent

degradation, an occupation not mean in itself, but degrading for the rich man's heir. Every thoughtful mind must be saddened at the contemplation of the waste and degradation which are inseparable from the condition of the sinner. The two, indeed, are twins, and cannot be sundered. It is not necessary that there should be manifest humiliation, some great change of circumstance, some ostentatious fall from a height originally possessed, in order to degrade an individual. That is degraded which is below the intention of its being. There is no degradation in the peasant wielding the flail or whistling at the plough—there is degradation in a monarch, if he be a *roué* and a gambler. There has been true royalty in a cottage—there has been sottish vileness on a throne. There is always sadness in the contemplation of ruin. Amid the broken columns of Baalbec or Palmyra, shapeless heaps, where once proud cities stood ; in some desolate fane, with the moonlight shining ghostly into crypt and cloister, the mind dwells regretfully upon the former time, when the hum of men broke lively on the listening ear, or through the long aisles there swept the cadence of some saintly psalm. We gaze mournfully upon a deserted mansion, with the sky looking clear upon its crumbling masonry or naked rafters—the tall, dank grass in the court-yard, which once echoed to the hoof of the baron's charger—the garden, erst kept so trimly, now a

bloomy wilderness of weeds and flowers, and trailing languidly over the blackening walls the ivy, that only parasite which clings faithfully to ruin. Sadder still is it to look upon the overthrown temple of the human mind, when morbid fancies prey, like so many vultures, on the distempered brain; and when the eye which ought to be kingly in its glances, is dulled in the sullenness of the idiot, or glares in the frenzy of the madman. But to those who are enlightened to understand the true relation of things, and what ought to be their connexion with the heavenly, there are sadder sights than these—sights that wake more solemn and passionate mourning—in the moral wastes of the world, and in the debasement of the nature which once bore the image of God. I see wealth, the gift of a good God, and intended to be used for His glory, hoarded by avarice, or lavished in extravagance and sin. I see genius, that regal dower of Heaven to man, grovelling, a pander, among the stews of sensuality, or blaspheming, an atheist, in all the ribaldries of scepticism. I see formalism and indifference, like Herod and Pilate, making truce together that they may slay the Holy and the Just One. I see men—earnest, thoughtful, amiable men—engrossed as eagerly about present advantage as if there were no death to prepare for, and no future to inherit—living for themselves as selfishly as if they had blotted out from the universe its

God. I see energy misdirected, passion frantic and triumphing, truth prostrate, error in high and even in holy places, manhood run to waste, the inheritance of immortality bartered for a golden bauble, conscience discrowned and a slave, the Law broken, the Gospel rejected, the blood of Jesus trampled on by those for whom it was shed, and accounted an unholy thing. Oh, brethren! is there not enough in the ruin to bring sorrow even upon an angel's gladness? and should not you, who are yourselves thus degraded—and there are some of you here—arouse yourselves, and throw your whole souls into the search for a refuge against the day of vengeance? for God will surely be avenged upon a nation and upon a people like this.

And then there is, thirdly, *the thought of abandonment and famine*. He “would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.” How utter and terrible the destitution! What! friendless! Where are the companions of his debauchery, the flatterers who laughed at his jokes, and drank his wine, and spunged, vile human funguses, upon his reckless liberality? Are they all gone from him—*all*? Is there not one to replenish the bare table, of whose sweepings he would have been formerly glad? And are these thy friendships, thou hollow, painted harlot of a world? “No man gave unto him.” And then came the famine, with its sick-

ening hunger, and its tortures of remorse, that wounded spirit which was a still sharper thorn. "And he began to be in want." He, upon whom in childhood's years no breath had blown too rudely; he, whose every want had been anticipated by a wishful tenderness that hardly brooked to slumber; he, whose youth was gay with the holiday promise of a sky without a cloud,—he began to be in want. So the famine came. But that dread famine of the soul is drearier, which sated worldlings sooner or later feel. That famine, when the spirit loathes its former food of ashes, and knows not where is aliment more congenial; when it shudders at the boisterous greeting of its associates in sin, and would give worlds if it could efface from itself those sinful memories which have burnt into the soul like fire. Oh, there are seasons of wretchedness when this gaunt famine comes—this dreary sense of inner hunger—which makss existence an intolerable burden. Hear the statesman on the pinnacle of power, when some one wished him a happy new year: "It had need be happier than the last, for I do not remember a single happy day in that." Hear the practised and wary lawyer, who had held the highest prizes of his profession so long, that he became the envy of the aspirants who coveted the seals: "A few weeks will send me to dear Encombe, as a short resting-place between vexation and the grave." Hear the accomplished

and valiant soldier, brilliant alike at the dinner-table and in the field : " Many a time when my society was the most courted, I would have given millions, if I had had them, to have had nothing more responsible about me than the soul of that dog." Such are the world's autobiographies, when they are candidly given, of courtiers who have been behind the scenes, and found their tinsel and their hollowness ; of infidel wits, who have been disgusted with adulation ; of poets, consumed with soul-thirst, which passion's Geyser springs had maddened, but could not slake ; of emperors who have left the monarchy for the monastery, and have worn the cowl as more fitting than the crown, or who broke their great false hearts in some rocky islet's solitude, racked with the twin maladies of the body and of the soul. Brethren, those of you who are yet in sin, has the famine come upon you ? or have you not quite spent all ? If its teeth are not now in your flesh, you need but go on in your waywardness, and you will feel them soon.

Homelessness, waste, famine—and do you really choose these things when God offers you the banquet, the fortune, the heaven ? Why, oh why, will you spend your money " for that which is not bread ? and your labour for that which satisfieth not ? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me : hear, and

your soul shall live." (Isa. lv. 2, 3.) I could almost rejoice, and surely it were no unkindness, that the famine should consume you, if only, like the prodigal, you might be driven back to the Father's house.

II.

A MIND'S TRANSITION.

“And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger ! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son : make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father.”—Luke xv. 17-20.

WE left the prodigal in the far country, degraded and in shame—reaping, in sad harvest from the swift seed himself had sown. Come with me into the far country again ; it will not harm you to burn for a while beneath its torrid sun, and there is a sight to see which may well repay our travel. In the world around us there are many interesting objects of study. He whose eyes are open, and whose mind is covetous of knowledge, may find, wherever his footsteps wander, abundant entertainment and delight. Who can think without emotion, intense even to awe, of the grand problem, the endlessly-repeated miracle of *life* ? Not only does man live, but nature lives—the elements live, the earth, the air, the woodlands, the waters all swarm with

life. There is life in the drop of dew and in the grain of sand ; in the mould which dampens on the crumbling wall ; in the phosphoric gleam which plays upon the ocean's wave. Our palaces are built with the skeletons of ancient life ; life cradles within life, and is evolved out of life and out of death ; and the very parasites which live within the living have often their parasites—"little animated miracles, claiming their modicum of nourishment that they may develop and exist." How wonderful all this is ! and yet how much more wonderful the history of one human heart ! Look at that world where thought is active and where feeling glows, where reason and passion meet and clash, and combat, now languid in the slumber of the sated senses, now thrilled with quickest pulses of desire. To read its mysteries, to study its changes, to understand its relations to itself, to the external world, to its fellows, to its God—to mark its action amid some surge of circumstances, or under the play and sweep of influences which aim to control it—how interesting and how profitable the endeavour ! Surely, in subordination to things higher and whose sacredness may not be disputed, there is truth in the often-quoted assertion of the poet, that "the proper study of mankind is man." Again, what interest attaches to a battle-field if on it was decided the destiny of a nation, or if the overthrow of some colossal ambition had made it a holy shrine of liberty ! How the

eye glistens as it hears the tale of conflict, gazes upon the heights which daring valour scaled, or the covert from whose friendly shade the panting ranks swept breathless on the foe—how the whole scene is pictured on the fancy, as if we were compassed by the smoke of war, and heard the din of musketry, and felt the clash of arms! Brethren, our business to-day is with a human heart, in which there raged a battle fiercer than all strife of hostile armies, a battle whose issues were more decisive and important than when combatants make truce, and tired contests end. The analysis of the process by which the evolution was effected in the nature of the prodigal must surely be interesting; for our own hearts have been, each of them, the arena of the same conflict, and the war is against a common enemy.

In the meditation upon the passage, we cannot forbear, in the first place, the reflection, that so rooted is the heart's enmity to God, that man must often be driven, as by the blast of a tempest, to submission and to duty. The prodigal must suffer beneath want, and shame, and abandonment before he thinks on his ways, and turns longingly to the house of his Father. How often is it that the consequences of crime—the disease, the misery, the remorsefulness which wait upon the track of sin, though in themselves sequences of a purely natural law, are used of God as means to impression and salvation! Some flippanit infidels have re-

marked upon the frequency of this, and in their small way have scoffed at a religion which they represented to be the offspring of disgust and satiety—the resource of a spirit bankrupt of enjoyment, and which has wrung for itself the last solitary husk of pleasure. But that must be a distorted and malignant spirit which could make light of such a merciful provision. Even were it true, which it is not, that all men become prodigal before they are penitent, and must be taught by personal and painful experience the vanity of the world, and its worthlessness to satisfy the wants of one immortal spirit, who does not see that there is proof in this at once of God's yearning for His creatures' highest happiness, and of the exquisite loving kindness which He has revealed in the Gospel of His Son? To have so framed man's nature that he is susceptible of being influenced to consideration and repentance by the very penalties which follow and brand his sin, is itself a token of compassion which is manifest to all but the callous and the blind. And oh! there is a riches of tender mercy in the thought that God will accept of a penitence, if it be but sincere, that is ever so lately rendered; and that even the cry of a bruised heart, wincing beneath a thousand disappointments, jaded from the fruitless labours of a wasted life-time, shall not come up before the throne in vain. Let no sinner, in that perversity of mischief which would distil poisons from a herbal, turn this

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grace of God into licentiousness, and "sin that grace may abound." There is no Gospel invitation for any moment but the present one ; and the often-reproved hardener of his neck, because he spurned the rebuke, and rooted himself in the wickedness, "shail suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." If the monitors have spoken to you—if sorrow, and disappointment, and shame have tracked your unguided footsteps, and like weird avengers have broken in upon your desperate repose, oh listen to their warnings while there is time. The Spirit will not always strive through these, or any messengers. Delay, and the cloud of doom may burst, and the vial of God's wrath be full.

You must not suppose that the mind of the prodigal came at once, in sudden revulsion, from heedlessness to serious thought, and from obduracy to tender and softened feeling. There would be, in all probability, in accordance with the laws of mental working, several preliminary stages. The earliest feelings would still partake of the character of resistance and rebellion. An awakened conscience, that is not pacified, only exasperates into more audacious rebellion. An active desire after things forfeited or forbidden chafes the spirit, as the rock, which does not hinder the stream, but impels it in more passionate tide. When the bewilderment which God has mercifully appointed to dull the first shock of sorrow had passed away, and the prodigal awoke

to realise his condition—alone, unfriended, penniless, a stranger—the first tendencies of the mind—unregenerate, and without any true knowledge, as it was—would be towards the sullenness of despair, and the second, perhaps, towards the blasphemies of bootless anger. Both these are natural to a condemning conscience, which has not been told of the divinely-troubled waters of some pool of healing. And into these refuges of lies what multitudes of sinners flee! Let me probe into your own conscience, as standing in this far country, you view the wreck of manhood on whose history we dwell. Are you not conscious that you have reposed often in some dread thought of Fatalism, and resigned yourselves in sullen fretfulness to consequences which your own imprudence or impiety had brought on? Have you not felt imbittered by the very discipline which was intended to subdue you, and to revolt more and more under the chastenings of the rod? Have not your passions been inflamed, and your enmity increased in bitterness, by the rankling soreness with which you have writhed under your present punishment, and by the boding horror which presented a more fearful one to come? Oh, there can be no greater curse than unsanctified suffering! Until the lion is tamed, he is more furious in the cage than in the forest; his roar is fiercer for his bondage, and the stamp of his foot and the lash of his tail against his den are displays

of wilder passion than when he roamed his native wilds. Many a man, whom shame has only maddened into more frantic resistance, walks the earth to-day a moral Laocoon, stung in a living martyrdom by the serpents which in his bosom lodge. It is hardly credible how much not only of human sadness, but of human sin, has sprung from the soul's first passionate recoil against detected criminality, or blasted reputation, or enforced penalty, or stained honour. When remorse scourges, it is not, like Solomon, with whips, but, like Rehoboam, with scorpions; and the intolerable anguish of a wounded spirit has prompted to many a deed of violence, from which, before his passions were hounded into madness by a guilty conscience, the man would have shrunk with loathing and with horror. Hath the murderer a witness of his crime? Then the remorseful conscience whispers that, for safety's sake, that witness too must die. Doth the good man of the house awake while the burglars are rifling his treasure? doth the child's eye gaze unwittingly upon a deed of shame? is the dread secret, locked for so long in the guilty bosom, in some tell-tale hour betrayed? Then the conscience, unheeded till it has become imbruted, will goad the passions into some fouler enormity of evil. Oh, when evil passions and an evil conscience seethe in the same caldron, who can imagine or create a deeper hell? The sullen despondency with which the prodi-

gal would strive to reconcile himself to his fate would mingle with oft-repeated curses pronounced upon his adverse destiny, rather than his own folly. By the license which thought gives us, we may go into those dreary chambers of his heart—we may hear its moaning, as it frets against the realities of its condition, even as the lone wave means painfully upon the cold and listening shore. “Well, it is over—the worst has come at last. It has threatened long, and there have been many dark prophecies of the end. I am ruined! That brief revel of my life! ah, how I hate the memory! Why did God make me thus? Why was the blood so hot in my veins that quiet happiness, such as I used to have, seemed all too dull and slow? How contented these swine feed! They limit their desires, and are happy in their limitation. They were never other than they are; but I—curses on the knaves that fawned upon me! curses on my own folly that fed itself upon their glistening lies! is there not one of them that cares for me?—not one that throws a thought after the man he helped to ruin? Be still, thou asking heart!—bind the girdle tighter, that will keep the hunger down! Ah! my table is soon spread! Husks! husks! husks!—bring the courses in! How dainty for the pampered servants that once stood behind my chair! Well, I’ll brave it all. What, yield to bow myself, a pitiful mendicant, where hearts have leaped to welcome the most

honoured guest they had! No! never! Ah! if my father could but see me now! No! I cannot go back to be the butt of the servants' scorn, and to writhe under the contemptuous pity of my sleek and jealous brother, and to meet the justly-offended glances of my father's eye. Better anything than that! Better these brute swine—these desolate fields—this lonely, savage isolation from the human—the drudgery of this purse-proud citizen! Nay, if the worst come to the worst—and these hollow cheeks and sunken eyes seem to show me the shadow of the end—I can but fold the robe over my broken heart and die!" Brethren, do you deem this a picture overwrought—that the shadows are laid on too thickly—that there breathes no man with soul so dead? Ah! there are thousands upon thousands who are thus steeling themselves against the convictions of God's Holy Spirit; and it may be that there are some before me, who, if I could but summon them hither, and constrain to candour, and ask to tell, each for himself, the story of his own bitterness, and pride, and struggle, would confess in your hearing that the half hath not been told.

But all this was but the swathing grave-cloth out of whose folds the new man was to rise—the gathering of the dark and angry cloud which was soon to be dissolved in showers, and on whose bosom the triumphant sun would paint the iris by and by. That ever-present Spirit, who

strives with men to bring them to the knowledge of the truth, was doubtless all the while at work upon the prodigal's heart ; and when He works, out of the brooding storm come the calm and the zephyr of the summer-tide—out of the death of enjoyment the rare blessedness which is the highest good—out of the death-working sorrow of the world the repentance which is unto life eternal.

We know not precisely how the change was effected from the hardness of heart, and contempt of God's word and commandment, to the softening of thought and contrition. Perhaps the Divine Spirit, wrought by the power of memory, thawed the ice away from the frosted spirit by sunny pictures of the past—by the vision of the ancestral home—of the guileless childhood—of the father's ceaseless strength of tenderness—of the spell of a living mother's love, or of the holier spell of a dead one. God does often work by these associations of subtle and powerful energy, and none may limit the Holy One of Israel ; but the distinction between the prodigal in his riot and the prodigal in his repentance was so marked and definite, as to leave no doubt of the reality of his change. Disposition, purpose, tendency, all were transformed. He had come under another influence, which had changed the whole bent of his desire, and which had given a new direction to every footstep of his being.

This thorough change in heart and feeling must come upon every penitent sinner ; and the consciousness of it must necessarily attend us in every God-ward movement of the soul. "That home, which once glowed for me with many-lighted windows of welcome, how sadly and deservedly forfeited ! That father, who has daily loaded me with benefit, and whose unutterable love has spared for me neither effort nor sacrifice, how sorely have I grieved him ! That life, with all its treasure of majestic and manifold endowment, how utterly have I wasted it ? Those sins, which estranged me from my youth's affections, and drove me to this heritage of foreign shame, how I abhor them now ! That pride and unbelief, which have imbittered my transgressions and hindered my return, how gladly would I trample them beneath my feet, wending homeward, and drown their memory, as I fall on my father's neck, in floods of contrite tears !" Something of this must every penitent feel—a loathing of his former self, a self-accusing fidelity which will not dissemble its impieties—a hatred, not only of the smart of sin, but of its substance—the yearning of a deeply-wounded spirit, which longs for reconciliation to the God and Father from whom it has become so wilfully estranged. Brethren, are these feelings yours ? Are you conscious that an influence has swept over you, working this bloodless revolution ? Do you wonder, in

awe, as you reflect upon your former peril—in gratitude, as you reflect upon your marvellous deliverance? Oh, if you have yielded to the Spirit's power, and felt the godly grief, at once heart-breaking and healing, you will not give stint to your devotion, nor be languid and measured in your service of the Lord. Yours will be a sense of obligation so deep and overwhelming, that it will constrain from you both the praise of the lip which knows not how to hush its doxologies, and the life's more constant and worthy hosanna.

If we look at the prodigal after he has yielded to the influence which has come down upon him from above, we see an order of being essentially different from the one on which we a while ago gazed. The external circumstances are much the same: the landscape is still sterile; the swine still feed; the man still stands, solitary and unfriended, and hungering; but he is not the same. He was defiant then; he is disconsolate now. The stern in his nature has been succeeded by the softened and the sad. Then he glared insanely round him, an utter rebel against the right, and shook his puny fist against the omnipotence which overcame him; now he smites, not the innocent air, but his own guilty breast, in whose sin he has learned to discover the secret of the sorrow and the shame. He is a thousand-fold a truer man now, ragged and hungry as he is, than

when he sotted in the boisterous wassail or the long carouse. Then he was the wealthy and the heedless, whose habits had become imbruted as the swine's; now he is the swine-herd, already kindling with the hopes and struggling into the aspirations of the man.

There are just three points suggested in the narrative which we may notice for a moment. It was a transition *from madness to reason, from sullen pride to submission and acknowledgment, from despondency to determined and immediate endeavor.* It is no word of man, but the word of inspiration, which has declared the insanity of a sinner, and that he "comes to himself" when he thinks upon his ways, and is wise. And all the habits in which the sinner is wont to indulge, answer to the habits and delusions of those who have been bereft of reason, or in whom it has been deposited from its rightful government of the man. Madness is rash and inconsiderate action—action without thought of consequences. The madman's hand is sudden in its violence; the madman's tongue shoots out its barbed arrows; he is reckless of the slain reputation, or of the murdered life; and is not like rashness a characteristic of the sinner? Little reck he of his own dishonour, or of the life that he has wasted in excess of riot. He goes heedlessly on, though his every step were up the crater's steep, and mid the crackling ashes. Madness is mistake of the great purposes of

life ; the employment of the faculties upon objects that are contemptible and unworthy. Hence you see the lunatic intently gazing into vacancy, or spending hours in the eager chase of insects on the wing, or scribbling, in strange medley of the ribald and the sacred, scraps of verse upon the torn-out pages of a Bible. And are there not greater degradations in the pursuits which engross such multitudes of the unconverted ? Are there not thousands who waste their lives in habits which spring from no thought, and lead to no result—habits compared with which, as has been well said, “there is activity in the life of a zoophyte, and earnestness in the eccentricities of a swallow ?” Madness is the fostering of morbid delusions which mount upon the brain unbidden ; the undue predominance of distempered fancy, which can invert all laws, and bring the impossible to be the actual in a moment at its regal bidding. You can see the lunatic—an imaginary king—with a wondrous sense of realness, and with a courtly bearing, happily unconscious, finding that “stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.” And such is “blindness of heart which has happened” unto a world of sinners, that they deem themselves kingly, when, alas ! they are sadly dishonoured, and exult in the distemper of a delirious freedom, when they are “led captive by the devil at his will.” In all circumstances of human transgression, varied only by the several modifica-

tions of the disease, there is truth in the declaration of the Scripture, "Madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead."

From this state of madness the contrite prodigal has emerged ; formerly rash and thoughtless, he has begun to consider, and consideration is the sworn enemy of levity, and the fruitful parent of high purposes in the soul ; formerly warped by a mistaken view of life, and led by erroneous judgment into corrupt and vicious practice, he has been awakened to juster perceptions of duty, and to a right valiant endeavour to discharge it ; formerly inflated with notions of a fictitious dignity, and eaten up with the pride of position or of possessions, he has now humbler, and therefore truer, views of himself, and sees himself the fouler because of his exalted lineage, just as a prince of the blood royal is most of all men traitorous to his rank and destiny when he companies with harlots and with thieves. When a sinner comes to himself he blushes for his former frenzy ; he feels himself a child of the Divine ; he feels himself an heir of the eternal ; and, looking with a strange disdain upon the things which formerly trammelled him, he lifts heavenward his flashing eye, and says, "There is my portion and my home." Now, with the Beulahland before him, he wonders that the mirage of life should have so long deluded him, and in the serenity of present peace can hardly believe

that he should ever have found a charm in the turbulence of passion, or in the glare of pleasure. Heaven and earth are now seen by him in their true relations—heaven the throne, earth the footstool—heaven the recompense, earth the probation. He has learnt not to despise this world, nor to undervalue its joys, when they are properly estimated. A savage recluse, or an envious and disappointed worldling, may do that. *He* would have done it in that savage mood of defiance which has just swept over him like a storm; but he has been taught, at the feet of Jesus, a kindlier and more human lore. He pities the world, not slanders it; he could weep for the sin which has defiled its beauty, and for the cruel scars which tell of outrage and of wrong; and enjoying with a rapturous gratitude its gladness, and enduring with faith's deep submission its portion of trial, he stands in his lot until the end of the days, never forgetful of the brighter world beyond—ripening by the privileges of the present into a mellow preparation for the future, and then, like good old Simeon, his dying breath a blessing, he departs in peace to heaven.

There is a transition, again, *from pride to submission and acknowledgment*. In his former mood of mind he only intensified his own rebellion, and was ready, doubtless, to blame circumstances, or companions, or destiny, or anything rather than his own wickedness and folly. “All things

have conspired against me ; never, surely, had any one so hard a lot as I. I might not have been exactly prudent now and then, but I have done nothing to merit such punishment as this. I will never confess that I have done wrong ; if I were to return to my father I would not abate a hair's-breadth of my privileges ; I would insist—and it is right, for am I not his son ?—upon being treated precisely as I was before.” So might have thought the prodigal in his pride. But in his penitence no humiliation is too low for him—no concealment nor extenuation is for a moment entertained ; with the expectation, not of sonship, but of servitude, and with the frank and sorrowful acknowledgment of sin, he purposes to travel, and to cast himself at the feet of his father. The penitential sorrow has trampled out the pride, and, instead of being prepared to dictate terms, he would submit cheerfully to the meanest lot, and to the most protracted trial, and to the coldest welcome, if only he may be permitted to reside in the old house at home. This humility is characteristic of all true contrition. As pride was one of the deadly sins by which our first parents fell, the whole provision of God's mercy, and every rescript and every promise of our religion, are framed, as with one common purpose, to hide pride from man. The Scriptures declare, with an earnestness of repetition which the occasion justifies, that salvation cannot be achieved by

the holiest human-living ; nor does meritoriousness attach to the most scrupulous observance of the law. As all—from the smiling babe upon the proud mother's knee, and the youth secluded, in the rural home, from the contagion of the city's leprosy, up to the savage nurtured in cruelty, and the bronzed perpetrator of a thousand crimes—have been born in sin and shapen in iniquity, so all are equally helpless to secure their own acceptance, or to maintain themselves for one brief moment in the consistency of spiritual living. There is no room for pride in any solitary human bosom. Once he was a sinner reckless in his sins, and with a high hand vaunting himself in his wickedness ; now he is but a sinner saved by grace ; he never grows into a sanctity which is independent of Divine assistance ; and if it were to happen for him to continue until there shone from him the glory of old age faithfully relying upon God, and then in some moment of garrulous vanity to loosen his hold of the sustaining arm, in that moment he would stumble and fall. Oh, bid your pride avaunt ! harbour it not for an instant in your bosom, for it and the carnal security which it engenders are the flatterer's most successful snares. The safest path to the City of Habitations is not by the mountain bridle-path, overhung by the loosened cliff, and overhanging the deep ravine, nor yet along the icy track of the glacier's glittering peril ; it winds along the green pas-

tures where still waters flow, and to the very slopes of the hill on which the city stands, "through the low vale of humble love."

And then, just in a word, there is the transition *from despondency to active and hopeful endeavour*: "I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father." There is not only the mental process, but the corresponding action—the rousing of the soul from its indolent and tormenting despair. This is one main difference between the godly sorrow and that consuming sadness which preys upon the heart of the worldling: the one disinclines, the other prompts to action; the one broods over its own haplessness until it wastes and dies, the other cries piteously for help, and then exults in deliverance and blessing. There was something more than fable in the old mythology which told of Pandora's box—a very receptacle of ills made tolerable only because there was hope at the bottom. In every true contrition there is hope. What! despair? Nay, though you were never such an arrant prodigal; nay, though you are wrinkled in iniquity, and your hoary head, so far from being a crown of righteousness, is a very brand of shame; nay, though you stood upon the loosening earth by the pit's

mouth, and heard the yell of demon voices and the dance of demon feet. Despair is no word for this world's languages ; despair has no right to a foot of land on this ransomed planet's territory ; its kingdom is not of this world, but of the world beneath and to come. We may leave the prodigal without shuddering ; he will be no worse when we come to him again. The evils of his pride and defiance were those he had most to dread ; he has parted with these, and we see him, subdued and earnest, travelling homeward with a royal hope within his soul.

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III.

THE JOY OF RETURN.

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."—LUKE xv. 20-24.

THERE are two kinds of minds of whose opinions we have been informed, touching the relative importance of this world to other worlds, all being provinces in the same moral empire—the one is the mind of the infidel, the other is the mind of the angel. As a matter of course, they represent the extremes of sentiment, and are as widely apart from each other as might be the descriptions of the same landscape given by two men, the one of whom had dimly seen it for a moment, as he woke up from a slumber in a fast train; the other of whom, from some heatherly slope or upland, had drunk in its beauty with ample leisure

and with a broad sweep of vision. When the infidel thinks of this world, even if he is so much of a believer as to admit its fall, he looks at it with narrow sympathies ; wrapt in his own selfishness, he cannot conceive of the nobility which would yearn with pity over some revolted province, and which would visit a scene of insurrection, not to destroy the rebels, but to pardon them ; nay, he cannot even conceive of a vigilant tenderness, so comprehensive that it can govern a universe of worlds with as perfect a recognition of the minute as of the magnificent in each, and so un-failing that it is moved by no rebellion from its benevolent design. Hence the great facts of man's sin and ransom ; of God's providence, caring for this world, the sickly, and the erring ; and of God's grace stooping to replace it in its orbit ; finding as they do no precedent in his own emotions, and evoking no response from the depths of his own consciousness, are treated by the sceptic as a delusion of fanaticism rather than as a reality of faith. He cannot believe that that man, as insignificant in comparison with the planet whose surface he scarcely specks as the one crystal to the avalanche, or the one bubble, with its mimic rainbow, to the torrent waters of Niagara, can be even looked at in the administration of the great economy, much less that all his concerns and all his interests are noted as carefully as if there were no other on the earth beside him.

He cannot believe that of all worlds which sun themselves in their Creator's smile, this reckling world which has strayed should be the object of especial graciousness, and that for its deliverance there should have been struck out of the heart of goodness a scheme of compassion unparalleled in the universe before. This is a knowledge altogether too wonderful and a belief altogether too high to have a home in an infidel's bosom. And yet these very facts are to the angels matters both of interest and of joy. These glorious beings, "full of eyes" to gather and observe all knowledge, and with large hearts of charity, vibrate, although of alien nature, to each chord of human struggle and conquest; to them it is but matter of higher praise that throughout the universe, and even into its very ravines and cells of being, there penetrate the glances of that eye whose brightness they must veil themselves to see; to them the grace which leaves the loyal worlds to condescend to the succour of the shrouded one is the rarest grace of all; and to angelic eyes, in the wondrous scheme of earth's redemption by the offering of the Divine Substitute, there is a perpetual mystery, into which they still desire to look, and where to their enraptured study the whole Deity is known.

Not merely on the God-ward side do these facts excite their adoration, but on the man-ward side their sympathy.

They have watched, you remember, over this our world from the beginning ; they sang together at its birth ; they revelled in the beauty of the young Eden, and strayed at dewy eve by the paths where its blest inhabitants wandered ; they shuddered beneath sin's cold shadow, and grieved over the blight and the departure of the innocence they had loved so well. Hence they have known our world in all its fortunes ; and just as an elder brother, of a benevolent heart, might heap caresses upon the infant born when he was old enough "to move about the house with joy, and with the certain step of man," finding endearment in its very helplessness ; so those holy angels, bright in the radiance of their first estate, have quick sensibilities for all human welfare still ; and whenever the sinner is arrested in his course, or the penitent cry is heard, or the prodigal, in his far country, turns a homeward glance of soul ; there comes a hush upon their harping, only to be succeeded by a burst of more rapturous music, for "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."

Your feeling, brethren, as you come with me to dwell upon the prodigal's return, will be, if you feel rightly, such as neither the sceptic nor the angel can compass ; for you will have the proper sympathy which neither of them possesses—the sceptic, because he has divorced himself from

the wedlock between humanity and Faith ; the angel, because he

“ Never felt above
Redeeming grace nor dying love.”

To you, it will but re-enact, in one phase or other of our meditation on it, a chapter in your own history. You will be saddened by the chill thought of present alienation, or thrilled by the memory of your own home-travel after years of estrangement and of sin.

We left the prodigal in the far country, but penitent, changed, resolute in the purpose to return to the house of his father. As we follow him on his journey, we can trace and sympathise with the mingling of feelings in his soul. There is not remorse—for remorse is the consciousness of guilt without the hope and prayer for mercy ; and all those dark emotions have gone from him, swept out of his soul when the fountains of its great deep broke up, by the intensity of their passionate flood—but there is deep sorrow for the past ; there is unfeigned sense of humiliation ; there is that compunctious sensitiveness of conscience which never can itself forgive. Then memory is busy, and upon his pained fancy she pictures the home-scenes of the happy past—the first sad hour of lawlessness when he sped into the far country, flushed with the new sense at once of wealth and freedom—and the utter worthlessness of those wild

joys compared with the earlier and serener ones, seen dimly in the vanishing perspective. Then anxiety is busy, and she projects her wonder into the nearing future, and speculates upon the probabilities of his reception. "Shall I be spurned from the door, or clasped to the heart? Will there be added to all my sufferings the humiliation of rejected penitence? Will the father, whose life-long kindness I have so ungratefully repaid, refuse to listen to my distress, and leave me to reap in bitter harvest the consequences of my folly? I am weary and sunken now; this hunger is a strange enfeebler—my limbs are supported only by a trembling hope of welcome. Shall I be shut out at last—shipwrecked at the harbour's mouth—left to die on the threshold of the home?" These are no comfortable feelings, but they are the servitude of the mind, to which sin compels its victims. Even when they have turned their backs upon its service, the iron has entered into their soul, and they feel the fretting of the chain which they drag behind them on their way to Christ.

We have spoken of the prodigal's possession of a hope, and you can easily imagine how, during the whole of this storm-tossed journey, hope would be the anchor of the soul. It is indeed the essential element of his repentance—the conservative principle which keeps the spirit alive—which restrains the frantic tears, or makes them scald no longer as

they flow—which animates the desire that would else languish, and stimulates the flagging steps which weary doubt so often makes to halt and stumble. “We are saved by hope,” says the Apostle; and there is a sense in which it is true of us all—we are saved by hope before we are saved by faith. The hope of mercy is in itself a thing in which the good Lord “taketh pleasure.” The hope of Christ is a staff in the hand of the weary, before the arm of Christ is stretched out on which he may be privileged to lean. Hope is a marvellous inspiration, which every heart confesses in some season of extremest peril. It can put nerve into the languid, and fleetness into the feet of exhaustion. Let the slim and feathery palm-grove be dimly descried, though ever so remotely, and the caravan will on—spite of the fatigue of the traveller, and the simoom’s blinding—to where, by the fringy rootlets, the desert-waters flow. Let there glimmer one star through the murky waste of night, and though the spars be shattered and the sails be riven, and the hurricane howls for its prey, the brave sailor will be lashed to the helm, and see already, through the tempest’s breaking, calm waters and a spotless sky. Let there be but the faintest intimation that all is not utterly hopeless, “when the grave and skilled physician by the trembling patient stands,” and anxious love will redouble its watching, and feel as if new feet had been given to the

leaden hours ; and the blood, which had begun to curdle, as if in sympathy with the dying, will flutter itself loose again into thankful and regular flow. Oh, who is there, however hapless his lot or forlorn his surroundings, who is beyond the influence of this choicest of earth's comforters—this faithful friend, which survives the flight of riches, and the wreck of reputation, and the break of health, and even the loss of dear and cherished friends? My brethren, I would fain rouse you all to the exercise of this your undoubted privilege in those higher matters which are between yourselves and God. Are you disquieted because of sin?—then you may hope. Are you guilty of transgressions which you feel to be both heinous and aggravated?—then you may hope. Are you conscious that yours have been sins of no common type of turpitude, towering above the guilt of ordinary sinners as the mountain above the lake which mirrors it?—still you may hope. Have you been a champion for evil, and trampled upon grace, and been both an adept and a teacher of ungodliness, and gone so recklessly on your hell-ward travel, that you feel as if brain and heart were already scorched by its consuming fire?—still there is hope—nay, hope! there is certainty—that if in right earnest you will begin at this moment, and, in penitence for past sin, and in purpose of future holiness, set about the seeking for salvation, no power on earth can

hinder—the whole army of demons cannot hinder—and the gracious God who calls you would, if it were necessary, unclasp the arms of Satan, which were already closing round you, and make the fires of torment lambent, lest one hair of your head should be singed by the devouring flame.

Now let us leave the prodigal a while ; or rather, let us precede him on his journey : you have been too long detained, perhaps, on the melancholy sight of ruin. The same license of thought which showed us the anatomy of the ruined man's heart will privilege us equally, and make us free of the house of his father. As we gaze upon the ample board, and fruitful acres, the purple vine climbing up the trellis, the lowing herd folded in the stalls, golden sheaves in the barn, sunny faces round the hearth ; thrift hoarding for generosity, order ministering to comfort, a common interest and a mutual love, we do not wonder at those glorious tints which the sharpened fancy of the prodigal drew. It is a sweet spot, surely. " If there be an elysium on earth it is this," with its days of happy toil and its nights of earned repose. There are many such homes on earth, brethren, where there seems so little of the palpable curse, and so much of the lingering blessing, that we are fain sometimes to cling to them too closely, and our hearts would build their tabernacles on these Tabors or Hermons of their love. But who may say that any of them is happy?

that there is any house without an apparition on its landing? that there are not secret griefs which gnaw the heart of wealth, and blanch the cheek of beauty; anxieties kept barred in each spirit, where the world may not intrude, and where even friends adventure not, but which are sapping the comfort and shortening the days? Take the case before us. Surely there can be no interruption to the happiness here. Competence, consideration, faithful servants, a well-regulated household, a dutiful son, all that the eye can covet or the heart can wish—is there a skeleton in this house too? Is there here some restless memory, interred in the grave of the long ago, but which will walk the earth notwithstanding? Ah! why those anxious glances when the wind makes the cedars groan, and against the lattice beats the frightened rain? why that sudden shade, fitful, pensive, almost moody, which gathers so often upon the lord of the mansion's brow? why that gaze across the stretching fields when the brief twilight sombres up the sky? Oh, there is a name banished from the lips, but not blotted from the hearts, of that household; they are all thrilled full often as by one sad impulse, and each can tell the thought that is present in the mind of the other; it is of that absent son and brother, who has forfeited his place in the circle, who has disgraced the family name, and “broken the crown of their pride,” but for whom in the ear of Heaven countless

prayers are breathed, and over whom in the watching night the big tears thickly fall. Day after day, in that father's kindly heart, the memory of wrong dies out, and the memory of the early promise and "the winsome look of grace" alone remains. Day after day the tide of love flows stronger and faster toward the erring one, and the dream of his return is cherished, until it becomes a habit to strain the eyes for his coming; and because the hush of the eventide is not broken by his remembered footstep, the father's heart is pained, and he gathers himself to his slumbers with a sigh. If that prodigal, whom we left behind us, did but know all this; if the yearnings of parental affection, and the willingness of parental pardon, were but as clear to him as they are to us, what a change would come upon the aspect of his thought and feeling!—how it would put wings into his feet, and light up the haggard countenance, so downcast now and sad! My hearers, it is for you these pictures are drawn, not that you may simply gaze as in a gallery, but that you may be profoundly impressed with the lessons which they are painted to teach. God, the eternal Jehovah, is the Father who thus yearns over the salvation of you, His sinning children. In Himself, of course, He is essentially and eternally happy, and, as an indivisible Spirit, has no parts, nor passions; in so far, therefore, the parallel is but in condescension to your infirmity He has represented

Himself as clothed with all the sensibilities of the human father, liable to be grieved by your apostasy, to be angered by your obstinate unbelief, and to long after your recovery with intense desire. So sacred is that immortal image of Himself within you, that grand power of choice which constitutes your moral freedom, that with *that* He will not interfere ; butt, short of any compulsion which involves a necessity of obedience, so infinite is His willingness to save you, that He will ply you with many arguments, persuade you by powerful motives, surround you with a hedge of circumstance, woo your heart in whispers to His service ; arouse your fears by startling providences, excite your hopes by loads of daily mercies, and endeavour, by all possible means of appeal which possess with you either tenderness or power, to allure you home.

“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.” He did not wait until the prodigal had knocked at the door, and been subjected to the servant’s wonder ; he did not wait for the low prostration, and for the abject and servile sorrow ; there was no standing upon a sort of etiquette of morals, no drawing of the cloak of dignity round until every punctilious requirement of orthodox penitence had been fulfilled, and then relaxing to grant the self-abased request, and to speak cold words of pardon. All

this would have been just, inflexibly just ; and the prodigal who had been thus treated would have had no cause of complaint, but rather much ground of thankfulness. We must take care that we are not spoiled by God's mercy, and tempted by his unparalleled compassion to think lightly and superficially of sin. Sin is a foul evil, and "when it is finished it bringeth forth death." Just as there issues spontaneous combustion from the decomposition of certain vegetable substances, so the very foulness of sin bursteth, as by natural sequence, into fire. But the very sense we have of the enormous impiety of sin will only enhance our estimate of the boundlessness of grace in its forgiveness. As in all other illustrations by which things divine are intended to be made known to us, the analogy halts for want of compass and power. To understand aright the early moving of God towards the sinner, we must remember His omniscience, an attribute which of course is wanting in the human father. The Divine eye can track the prodigal through every brake and scur of the far country into which he has wandered ; no debauchery of his excess of riot is hidden ; his defiance and his depression, the steeling and the softening of his soul, are alike open to the glances from which nothing is concealed. He knows, O sinner, that secret deed of darkness, covered up so carefully from human sight, that habit of impurity or fraud, that stern and haughty resis-

tance to his will, which thy soul has indulged through so many rebellious years. He knows, O penitent, thy soul's first yearnings after Him, thy struggles against the corruption which yet mastered thee, thy brave upspringing with a new purpose of right even after mortifying failure, thy secret loathing of thy sin, the uneasy clanking of the chain which thou hadst yet no key to open and no strength to snap in sunder. The Father sees thee, though thou art yet a long way off. His compassion goes out to meet thee from the first moment when thy homeward march begins; thy prayers and thine alms come up before Him, like those of Cornelius, "for a memorial," though not for a merit; in token of thy sincerity, though not in purchase of thy pardon. Oh, what unspeakable comfort couches in this thought for every contrite heart! Thy pilgrimage need not be with bleeding feet and long endurance to a far-off shrine, a shrine at which the idol abides senselessly, with nor heart to feel nor strength to succour. The word of grace is nigh thee, even in thy heart and in thy mouth. Swift as the hart upon the mountains runs the Father's love to meet and welcome thee. Thou hast been long expected; the home has hardly seemed complete without the erring but forgotten child. Bruised and hungering as thou art, start thee on the journey; thou shalt not travel all the way alone; the first part of thy travel may be with sorrowful heart and

burdened back, but hie thee to the cross of Jesus. So sure as God's word is true, He will meet thee there, and thy burden shall fall from thy shoulders, and the sadness from thy heart, and thou shalt bound along thy joyous pilgrimage a light-hearted, because forgiven, sinner.

Your impression of God's loving kindness will be deepened—and that is surely the intention of this pearl of parables—if you pass from the haste with which the prodigal was met to consider the welcome with which the prodigal was greeted. We last saw him wending his way to his father, agitated with a thousand apprehensions, but brave in the doing of what he had recently discovered to be right. He had not only thought upon return, but he had let purpose ripen into deed. There are multitudes who think upon repentance and faith as duties to be some time performed, but who dream about them through the kindly summer-time, and then, when the winter comes, are in the far country, ragged and famine-stricken still; but in the case before us, the action waited promptly on the will. He not only came to himself, but he came to his father. And now they have met—the yearning father, and his humbled child. The father saw him first, for his love looked out and his compassion ran; the son came slowly, with downcast eyes, that dreaded the first glimpse of the home which they yet longed unutterably to see. If he sighted the running

figure in the distance, and saw as it came near that the form was the venerable one of his father ; still more, if his tumult of emotion allowed him, with a strange thrill of hope, to note the outstretched arms and kindling eye, how must his heart have palpitated with the rushing blood, and the wave of his penitence swelled into a swifter tide ! But, perhaps, he knew not of this ; perhaps, overwhelmed with the feelings or oppressed by the fears which mastered him, he saddened on unheeding, until he was roused from his stupor of sorrow by the clasp of his father's arms. Oh, the delight of that first moment of conscious favour ! Think of all the raptures of deliverance first realised after imminent peril—the drowning, when the strong swimmer grasps him ; the fire-girdled, when from the topmost window the fireman receives the fainting on his safe but slender ladder ; the slave, when from the lash, and the swamp, and the branding iron, he leaps on to the frontiers of freedom ; the child, when the agonized mother presses him to her bosom, unharmed from the eagle's talons—what are they all to the first gush of rapturous gladness which thrills, in the moment of reconciliation, through the breast of the forgiven sinner ; the transition is so marvellous, so startling, that it is all too deep for language. Condemned before ! now looking into eyes that glisten with tenderness, and lips that quiver with pardons. Polluted before ! now sensible of an

inner cleansing. Aimless and without a hope before ; now furnished, so to speak, with the principia of a new existence, and strong to work it out with a will. Orphaned in the vast universe before ! now conscious of encircling arms and of a living Father. Have you felt it ? The rare blessedness, the indefinable thrill, almost startling you, until, by lapse of time, it became familiar happiness, and you were taught of God to call it by its proper name,

“That I—a child of wrath and hell—

I should be called a child of God.”

Oh, if you have not, God waits to confer it ; in Christ it is ready for your faith. The atonement has purchased not only deliverance but adoption for the world, and you, the vilest and the farthest prodigal, may lift your eyes, red with the contrite tears, and call God Father by the Holy Ghost. The love of God to man is never displayed more illustriously than in his reception of the returning sinner. Take the tenderest-hearted father that you know, one of those who are deemed weakly indulgent to a degree incompatible with the proper maintenance of authority, and ask yourselves what his reception would be of a child who had outraged his tenderness, wasted his property, and brought disgrace and scandal upon a name which a long ancestry of integrity had honoured. Alas ! such are the strange contradictions

of the nature we inherit, that the most blindly indulgent would become the most bitterly implacable, and even in the case of the most forgiving there would be a struggle with pride, and a distant waiting for the full tale of confession, and a reserve, and a hesitancy, and a long probation before full re-instalment into former privilege ; and even then, a lurking suspicion and a jealous watchfulness, and now and then the sharp arrows of a keen upbraiding, which would show that the lip's forgiveness of the sinner is far easier than the heart's oblivion of the sin. But not so does God measure His graciousness towards the penitents whom, for Jesus' sake, He accepts and welcomes to His favour. Not the stern silence, but the warm embrace ; not the abhorrent recoil from pollution, but the large charity which at once exalts the abased, and clothes and cleanses the vile ; not the ear strained for the listening to the confession, but the kiss which heals the wound and stops the words ; not the yoke of servitude, but the ring of affection ; not the measured tones and solemn cautions of a judicial acquittal, but the festal feast and the diffusive gladness, as when an heir of broad lands is born. Surely this is unexampled grace, and yet this is the golden sceptre which is stretched out by the monarch to you. A servant ! No, but a robe, and shoes, and a ring—and these are not the apparel of slaves : they have serge for garment, and a badge for decoration,

and tread with naked feet—but a robe, and shoes, and a ring for the returning prodigal ; and thus the Father owns the son.

There is something significant in the thought that the latter part of the prodigal's purposed confession was suppressed in the presence of the father. "Make me as one of thy hired servants" was in his heart in the far country, but not on his lips when he sobbed out his penitence at home ; and why was this ? It was in his heart still—he felt it to be immeasurably more than he deserved—he would willingly have borne the yoke for life, if only his loving obedience might have shown that he was changed, but he could not further sin against his father's fatherliness ; and refusal to accept the sonship which was pressed upon him in the kiss of peace would have been to do that fatherliness dishonour. Take heed, thou penitent, that thou dost not thus sin to-day. It is well for thee to feel thy humbleness, and, in the sense of thy own demerit, to abase thyself lowly before God ; but it is not well to persist in obstinate and wilful unbelief. Thou honourest God by the simplicity and heartiness of thy trust in His promises. It is thy truest duty, as well as thy most surpassing privilege, to be called His son. To despise this high calling is sin in thee, and thou shalt be punished for it as surely as the man who re-

fused the rich robe at the wedding banquet, who was cast to the darkness and the shame.

God welcoming and blessing His erring but now penitent child ! And is that sight—visible to the higher intelligences who in heaven throb with human sympathies and recognitions still—visible in this house of prayer ? Oh, there can be no sight like that ! Before it fade the most gorgeous things that start from canvas or that speak in marble ; nothing so rapturous and wonderful ever caught the poet's eye in the rolling of its finest frenzy. Day unto day uttereth no speech so eloquent ; night unto night discovereth no secret of such glowing wonder ; the deep sea hath no treasure of so rare a preciousness ; the winged winds bear no such joyous tidings. It thrills through all the regions of the sentient and the happy. The wings of the seraphim unfold with a newer flutter of gladness. The Divine Son rejoices to see of the travail of His soul ; and the everlasting Father, attesting its eternal *fitness*, proclaims to the awed and silent heaven, "It was meet that we should make merry and be glad," for this my son "was dead, and is alive again ; and was lost, and is found."

IV.

THE DISSENTIENT TO THE COMMON JOY.

“Now his elder son was in the field : and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come ; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in : therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he, answering, said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee ; neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment ; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends : but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad : for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again ; and was lost, and is found.”—LUKE xv. 25-32.

THE instruction of this inimitable parable is not yet exhausted. We left the household amid a scene of apparently universal gladness. The penitence was accepted, the re-

conciliation was complete; the prodigal, a prodigal no longer, renewed a happiness from which he had been long estranged; the joy spread from heart to heart, and the house rang with the dance-music, that light and tripping carol of joyous song which young lips warble when skies are bright, and hope has banished care. But from this general satisfaction there now appears to be one dissentient—and as you have seen it often in common life, where the harmony of a party has been thoroughly spoiled by one proud or petulant intruder—the elder son comes in. He has been out in the field, and returning, perhaps, at the punctual meal-time, he marks and wonders at the unwonted festivity which has broken in upon the quiet of his home. When he hears the cause, his annoyance is not abated, but inflamed. He is angry, jealous, upbraiding, proof against the entreaties of his father, and so pertinacious in his offended pride, that he elicits from the father a declaration of the essential rightness of his conduct in the matter of the prodigal, and an implied rebuke of his own disobedience and sin. It will not be amiss for us to inquire—as a pendant to the meditations which have already occupied us—into this problem of character. It may be that, as we look into it, we may start some stray reflection that will encourage or that will condemn ourselves.

It is necessary to remind ourselves that the audience to

whom these parables were spoken was a mingled one of Pharisees and publicans ; for it seems as though the contempt felt by the despisers had been publicly expressed—expressed in the hearing of the despised—and that the great Teacher willed to weave into His narrative some appropriate instruction for each. It is clear, too, that the immediate purpose which the parables were designed to answer, was the rebuke of the narrowness which murmured because of the welcome which was given to the publicans and sinners. Hence it is probable that the mass of expositors are right, when they conclude that there is allusion, in the character of the elder son, to the Jew, as distinguished by his affected superiority to the Gentile, and to the Pharisee, as a sort of religious aristocrat among the Jews. Still there are difficulties connected with every exposition. Our object is to extract as much of the gold out of the mine as we may, and that object will be best attained by combining, so far as they involve no contradiction, the various thoughts to which the subject naturally gives rise, and, without aiming at any elaborate construction, to get some harvest of profit from them all.

And first, *there is something in the state of feeling which we may suppose to have existed in the elder son with which many a perplexed Christian can very largely sympathize.* We may suppose him to have been trained, from his youth,

to believe that there was excellency in obedience, and that in every well ordered household it would be appropriately recognized and rewarded. Just so we are taught that recompense of virtue and punishment of vice are fundamental principles of government; and that Jehovah, the supreme source of government, has declared that He loveth righteousness, and "hateth iniquity as an abominable thing." With these convictions instilled into him, as the early instructions of his childhood, and with the experience which his own family history gave him of the discomfort and impiety of sin, he comes home from his honest industry, and is astonished to perceive lighted windows, and hear the sound of the harp and of the tabret swelling through the unaccustomed air. He inquires into the cause, and is told that one has come who is associated in his mind only with ideas of profligacy and shame, and that his return has been hailed with a rapture of revelry which during long years of quiet service never woke up in the father's house for *him*. Is it not natural that his first thought should be a bewildered wonder? Will not the murmur rise almost involuntarily? Will not the vague idea of natural justice feel as if it were outraged, and the mind shudder as with a flash of consciousness that all is not right somehow in the moral government which sanctions such an anomaly? You can listen, for the heart's voice is audible—"My brother come

and this pageantry of welcome for *him*! His seems to be the license, and mine the drudgery. He has had a gay career of it, and it seems that his fortune has not forsaken him now. It is very strange! Obedience is not worth the music and the festival. They are reserved for riot and ruin. It seems as though the surest way to my father's heart is to be wild, and wayward, and prodigal. There is no distinction, then, between good and evil, or if there be, the evil has the advantage, for the banquet follows hard on debauchery, and looks like its wages of reward. 'Verily, I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency,' for slights are put upon faithfulness, and premiums offered to sin." Brethren, how many of us are there who recognize the tones of our own fretful wailing under the pressure of some multitude of thoughts which have sorely perplexed our souls? It is no new temptation. Like a sigh of the wind it swept over hearts in ancient Israel, and to all ages there has been this darkling shadow of a great mystery, beneath which men have groped in painfullest uncertainty, until they could emerge happily into a firm reliance. David felt it when he looked upon the flourishing of the wicked; and it was thought too painful for him "until" he "went into the sanctuary of God." Job felt it, when disaster followed on disaster, and each dashed a breaker of sorrow upon the strand of his soul.

The labourers felt it who were hired when the dew glittered and the lark sang, because those who wrought but one hour were made equal in remuneration to them, who had borne the burden and heat of the day. We have felt it in commercial life, when a man of small principle has grasped wealth by handfuls, as a child gathers pebbles on the shore, while a tradesman of unbending honesty has struggled through a life-time just to keep a doubtful equality between the winner and the spender. We have felt it in social life, when a reconciled adversary has stirred up all the warmth of kindly feeling, and gone straight into the inner chambers of a heart which has been locked to the fast and quiet friend of years. We have felt it in religious life, when a newly-converted man has revelled in a joy and comfort which have never thrilled ourselves, though we have striven eagerly after the Divine image, and laboured in the Divine service delightedly and long. It is much the same feeling with which a cynic with a turn for sarcasm might inveigh against that inverted philanthropy which expands its charities on criminals, and leaves honest men to shudder before the shadow of famine, or which immures helpless integrity in a prison which it calls a workhouse, and shelters lusty thieveishness in a workhouse which it calls a prison, or which suffers honesty to embrown itself to the swarth of toil, and then starve through an angry winter, in dismal

attics and on scanty fare, while felons are so warmly housed and carefully trained, and kindly fed, that they sigh when their release approaches, and steal *on purpose* to have a lodging in Dartmoor or Portland again. Yes! there are such anomalies both in man's and in God's government, which baffle all hasty thinkers, and which lead perplexed ones, in the track of the elder son, to feel wonder, and then despondency, and then murmuring, and then anger, and jealousy, and sullenness, and all the offspring of rebellion.

It was surely to soothe this natural perturbation, and to reassure the startled faith in goodness, shocked by this natural surprise, that the father "came out and entreated him." God bears with the infirmities of his people, and will not always chide, though there will be always cause for chiding. He does not break the bruised reed, nor fret it for its lack of strength; He does not quench the smoking flax, in anger that there is dark vapour where there ought to be brilliant flame. He props the reed and fans the flax until they become as a rod of strength, and as a beacon-blaze upon a hill. How marked and beautiful was this characteristic in the teaching of Jesus? Does the faith of the affrighted disciples fail them in a storm-swept vessel? He utters no rebuke of their cowardice until He has removed the source of their terror. Does Peter, faltering from his momentary heroism, sink through the yielding wave; or

stricken with a very horror of cowardice, fringe his denial with a border of blasphemy! He is helped from the billows, and graciously forgiven for the sin. Do Zebedee's children become possessed of a strange ambition, and seek for a proud pre-eminence in His kingdom amid the clamour of the murmuring ten? He stills the rising indignation, and places the feet of humility upon the neck of pride. Is ~~Thomas~~ incredulous until the prints and scars convince him? In "reach hither thy finger," there is the best possible rebuke for unbelief.

And if you look into your own hearts you will discover manifold and glorious instances of God's long-suffering. Can you not recall those reasons in your history when you staggered at the greatness of the promise, or shrank from the difficulty of the command; when, in the day of smiling fortune, you forgot the arm that raised you, and, in the day of frowning skies, you hardly and terribly rebelled? You have often since been so conscious of your sinfulness that you have wondered that the Lord bore with you, and your estimate of Divine loving-kindness rose so high that to you it is no marvel that, however strongly provoked to anger, He should come out and entreat the sinners against His grace and love.

The answer of the father to the petulant remonstrance of the son is very noticeable, and is very decisive. He might

—human fathers would—have sternly rebuked all interference with his rightful authority ; have stood upon his fatherly prerogative, and have frowned the complainer into silence by such an utterance as, “Is thine eye evil because I am good ; is it not lawful for me to do as I will with mine own ?” He might have readily exposed the lurking hypocrisy and alienation which the very terms of the remonstrance displayed. But he did neither of these. The justification of his conduct, which he condescends to make, rests not upon eternal sovereignty, but upon eternal fitness—not “I have willed to do this thing,” but “It was meet that we should make merry and be glad : for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again ; and was lost, and is found.”

This is but the repeated statement of that which it is the province of the whole chapter to enforce—that there is something in the moral recovery of a sinner over which God himself rejoices, and which is matter of legitimate gladness to every creature that His hands have made. The chapter says there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, “*more* than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.” Christ says there is a propriety in this, and we respond to it by the whole of our proceeding in the conduct of our natural affections, or in the regulation of our daily lives. We do not get into ecstasies every morning as we greet the friends from whom we parted overnight,

and with whom we have exchanged the same customary salutations for years. Our deep love is not the less because the expressions of it are the less demonstrative. The gay peasants of beautiful Italy are so accustomed to bright sun and blue sky that they are not prostrate in thankfulness, nor wild with delight, when they see the morning dawn ; but in some arctic island, or at the close of some protracted rainy season in the tropical Savannah, the first glimpse of sunshine will be an inspiration of gladness, or a call to prayer. The stream flows leisurely in its wonted bed until the tempest howls or the obstruction comes, and then it overflows. Let the peril threaten our beloved ones, let the fangs of illness fasten, or the cold world's scorn assail, or adverse influences lour, and the deep tenderness will well forth upon them, with a full tide, unexpected even to ourselves, a very Nile of soothing and healing waters. If it had been the hap of the elder son to sicken, or to have been crushed beneath the bitterness of some terrible sorrow, all the spirit's joy-bells would have been rung for his recovery, and all the wealth's resources lavished with a free hand to restore to him the comfort of his soul. It was not that the father preferred the profligate to the faithful, or sanctioned disobedience and was indifferent to loyalty ; in the one case, assuming that the elder's account of his own fidelity was true, there had been years of uninterrupted complacency

and favour ; in the other case there was but an hour—a wild and rapturous hour of joy.

Not only is the justification rested upon the rightfulness of rejoicing over the recovery of the erring, but the elder son is reminded that his privilege is the greatest after all—“Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.” You can expand this sentiment that you may bring out all its fullness of meaning. “My son, why this unreasonable anger ? of what hast thou to complain ? hast thou not partaken of my bounty, shared my counsels, and been compassed with my love continually ? I had thought that thou lovedst me, and that my presence was dearer to thee than a kid slaughtered from the fold for a separate revel with ‘thy friends.’ Thou art ever with me. For thee there has been a constant feast, a never-ceasing smile of welcome. Why grudge to thy brother an hour of the gladness which thou hast realized for these many years ? Thou complainest that thou hast never had a feast. No, nor the famine, nor the rags, nor the desertion of thy friends, nor the company of the swine. If thou hast never been wild with delight, thou hast never been frantic with agony ; if thou hast never felt the ecstasy, thou hast never felt the hunger. Thy brother has smiled to-day in the light of his father’s countenance—that light has shone upon thee, familiarly and without a

cloud ; thy brother has had shoes, a ring, a robe, a banquet—thou THE INHERITANCE, for ‘all that I have is thine.’ ”

Brethren, surely our questionings have been answered, and our unbelief rebuked, while the father has thus been talking to the elder son. In the long run, depend upon it, there is a reward for the righteous, and the triumphing of the wicked is short. All our misgiving arises only from our short-sightedness, and we should bow in acquiescence and in gratitude if, like God, we could see the end from the beginning. The ancient Nemesis was fabled sometimes to tarry, in order that the man she tracked to ruin might be the more decisively destroyed; and God’s providence, though in the noon of man’s passion it may seem to slumber, is but accumulating the electricity which, in the dead of night, shall hurl its lightnings on his head. “Fret not thyself,” therefore, “because of evil-doers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity : for they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good : so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord ; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord ; trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass.” (Ps. xxxvii. 1–5.) Do you wonder that that newly converted man, he who has been changed suddenly by Divine grace from profligacy to penitence,

should have so much of the peace that passeth understanding, and of the joy of the Holy Ghost? Ah! cease your wonder—you have no need to envy him. He has been an orphan all his life; he may be allowed to exult a little in the new sensation of a father's clasping arms. He has hungered so long that his constitution has lost its tone, and he must have cordials and stimulants to supply his lack of vigour. He has been a serf and vassal, and he only leaps and shouts, perhaps, in this the first delirium of his freedom. You need not envy him. Ah! if you could but see how he envies *you*—you, the elder sons—who, during his long years of outlaw-life, have dwelt quietly and happily at home. He needs more joy than you do. If he has not an exuberance of Divine comfort, he will fail and be disheartened in the work which he has arisen to do. Long habits of ungodliness are tyrannous over him, from which your lives are free. There are memories of sin which haunt him like avenging spectres, and which people his fancy oftentimes with visions of such terrible impurity that if they could but be burnt out of his soul by sharpest cautery, he would shout welcome to the hissing brand. Rejoice over that prodigal, I charge you. Do not give him the cold glance and the short answer; watch over him with loving jealousy; help him speedily if his footsteps stumble. Prove your godliness by your *God-likeness*, in your tenderness of care over the erring

and in your frank and hearty joy for his recovery. "It is meet that you should make merry and be glad ; for this *your brother* [can you say the word heartily ? if you cannot, you are none of Christ's] was dead and is alive again ; and was lost, and is found."

We fear, however, that with all our willingness to throw the mantle of charity over this elder son, we are compelled, by the evidence, to return him as the guiltier of the twain. It is not the perplexed saint who speaks in the bitter language of the narrative : taking the best view of it, *it is the ungenial and reluctant servant* ; taking the worst view of it, *it is the unmasked hypocrite, or the ostentatious Pharisee.*

The type of character that is unfolded to us is of a very unamiable sort. He seems to have been a man reserved, and unsocial, with very little of the milk of human kindness—a man who could not have been intemperate if he would, at least without trampling upon all the barriers of his temperament—a miser rather than a spendthrift. The prodigal, at his wildest, was redeemed by a careless generosity, that might have shared his last shekel with a beggar ; but the elder son would have been free from all suspicion of being guilty of any extravagance of charity. The prodigal turned out the whole of his nature—the worst of him was patent to the sun ; but the elder constrained himself to a decorous service, and hid, behind a plausible conduct, coarse

passions and a sordid soul. At the best, there is nothing winning about him ; he is but a son with a servant's heart. A son, with the heart of a son, might have been surprised when he heard the unwonted merriment ; but his inquiry of the cause would have been made, not of the servant, but of the father, and the ice would have melted from his heart, even if annoyance had hastily frosted it, when his father came out and entreated him to fill the reserved seat, and share the general joy. Brethren, there are such ungenial professors of religion now—men “whose lot,” in the quaint words of another, “is always cast in the land of Cabul.” They are always “in the field” when the prodigal comes home ; they are never ready to give the first shake of the hand to the wanderer ; they fret at the bustle of his reception, partly because it disturbs their ease, and partly because it reveals their littleness. Their religion is a task-work, not a service of love—a burdened pilgrimage, not a sunny travel home. Meet them where you will, the atmosphere becomes suddenly polar ; their trials are grievous, their discontents are many. To them there is no life in the Church, no summer in the world. Their principal activity is to suggest a deficiency or to expose a fault ; for in proportion to their discomfort is their censoriousness, for, as it is a literary canon that the critical tendency lodges in the shallowest brain, even so the slanderous tendency coils

about the weakest heart. If they are in the vineyard at all they are stunted shrubs, or trees of eccentric growth—they do not flourish in the beauty of the palm, nor endure in the vigor of the cedar. They know not of the delight of conversion, they rejoice not in God their Saviour. How utterly unhappy such a state of heart must be! The elder sons of this type are their own worst enemies ever. “He would not go in.” Well, and who suffered but himself? The lights were not put out, the music did not cease, the festivity of the gathered household flowed evenly and merrily on. Even the father, though he came out to expostulate, and was grieved at the sullenness and sin, went in again to those who would appreciate his kindness, and whom his smile made happy. Father, servants, friends, prodigal, all were rejoicing together; he alone in the outer darkness nursed his selfish pride, and voluntarily excluded himself from the light and gladness of the home. Oh, if there are any here who thus banish themselves from the Church’s common joy, I pray you think upon your folly! That Cabul is an unsightly place of sojourn, and there is no passage from it into heaven.

If, however, you narrowly look into the spirit of the elder son, it is to be feared that we can scarcely accord to him even the qualified praise of being a sincere but eccentric striver after the right. Closely examined, there are many

points of identity between him and his brother, as his brother was when we first made his acquaintance, while there are features about the elder which make his impiety not only lamentable but repulsive. There was the same alienation of heart. It betrays itself in his very words. "Lo! these many years do I *serve* thee." A son would have said *love* thee; but the spirit of the slave and of the hireling degraded the affection into a servitude undertaken for the hope of a reward. Hence he complains, as a servant might whose wages had been unrighteously withheld, "Thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." There was the same sinful longing for freedom from restraint and for indulgence in independent merriment. He, too, must have had comrades that were unfitted for the presence of his father. With equal love of pleasure to his brother, but with a greater selfishness, he panted for the license which yet his worldly prudence forbade him to request. How much better were his "friends" than the "harlots" of his erring brother? Did not the one answer to the other? In these, the essential points of the prodigal's rebellion, the elder was, on the testimony of his own lips—wrung from him in that unguarded moment when the mask slipped off from the countenance, because anger had convulsed it—as guilty as the brother he despised. Then he had other vices, which he could not forbear to display,

and from which his more reckless brother was free. The faults of the prodigal were far removed from the dastardly and mean ; but many of those vile passions for which in the days of His flesh Christ reserved his severest reprobations, found a lodgment in the elder brother's soul. There is an implied isolation in the fact of his being left "in the field" until the ordinary hour of his return. The father knew his *selfishness* and feared his ire, or the fleetness of foot would have been despatched to summon him to the festival of love. Then he displays the *anger* of offended pride, and *envy*, too gross and foul a fiend to be harboured in a good man's bosom. Then the indignant remonstrance, which was the cruel answer to the father's entreaty, discovered not only his *servile spirit* and his *sordid hope of advantage*, but the complacent and laughty *self-righteousness* which, like Peter's Galilean speech, "bewrayeth" the Pharisee all the world over : "Lo, these many years do I serve thee ; neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." How utterly does sin blind the conscience of its perpetrator ! I have seen a drunkard stutter out an indignant protest against a charge of intemperance. I have known a swearer deny, with an oath, that he was ever guilty of a habit so profane ; and here is a poor deluded sinner, in the very act of sin—sin against the love due to his brother and the honour due to his father together—lay-

ing to his soul the unction of a perfect righteousness, as if the summer fleece were impure in his presence, and the snow-flake stained beside him. What concentrated evil-heartedness, moreover, is there in the whole of his reference to the prodigal. "This thy son"—as though he had no affinity of blood, as though he would take care to shake free from the leprosy of such polluted relationship—"was come"—not was come *back*; that thought was a thought too high, his was too callous a nature to be thrilled with the great idea of *return*—"was come"—because necessity impelled him, and hunger drove him hither, an unfriended and miserable beggar—"which hath devoured thy living with harlots." How knew *he* that? Did his own base heart teach him? Was "the wish the father to the thought?" "*Thy* living"—every word is loaded with the utmost possible harshness, for, as his portion of goods, the living was in a sense his own. "But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."

Brethren, I ask you now, which is the guiltier—the generous, thoughtless, riotous prodigal, or the seemly, slanderous, hypocritical elder brother? And there are many such in our churches and congregations now. Do you ask who they are? All who hold the form, but who deny the power of godliness—all who "draw near to God with their mouth

while [their heart is far from him]"—all who have never bowed the knee in broken-hearted sorrow, and are yet crying, Peace, peace! to their imperilled and unhappy souls—all who repine at another's elevation, or are envious of another's good, while they deem their own virtues so unmistakable, and their own excellence so manifest, as to silence all gainsayers—they are the elder brothers. Perhaps—let us come closer—there is very much of his image in ourselves. It is said that when a company of German divines were discussing this parable, and various conjectures were hazarded as to the identity of this elder son, a devout but eccentric brother, on being applied to for his opinion, said—"I know, for I learned it yesterday. *It is myself!* for I fretted and murmured because such an one had an extraordinary baptism of the Holy Spirit from on high." Oh for the spirit of searching, to discover and to exorcise the demon!

But there is mercy even for the elder son. The Father entreats still; and his censoriousness and hypocrisy, as well as his impatience and estrangement, may be freely and graciously forgiven. The grand jubilate with which the chapter closes forbids us to despair of any. It is meet that God should save them, and that the whole ransomed universe should exult over the pardoned sinner. Mercy! joy because of mercy! These are the latest notes of the spirit-psalm

which linger on our ears and in our hearts as this sweet chapter closes. Mercy! God's best and dearest attribute! Mercy! earth's last and fondest hope! Mercy! Heaven's crowning and eternal triumph! It is stammered out from mortal lips that fain would lisp its music—it swells in grandest diapason in the song of the redeemed. Last and longest of the impressions which this subject may have made upon our minds, this thought of mercy clings. And now that we are closing this series of life-pictures, drawn with a trembling hand, and with a deep consciousness of latent beauty and power in the subject which are beyond the artist's skill, one vision seems to fill the foreground: it is that of the Father clasping the prodigal to his embrace in the sight of earth and heaven, and saying, in tones to which the choirs of angels were discord, and which each seraph hushes his song that he may hear, "I am He that speak in righteousness," and

"MIGHTY TO SAVE."